



Taekwondo

a path to excellence

DOUG COOK

ACHIEVING PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL ENRICHMENT
THROUGH DISCIPLINED PRACTICE



Taekwondo—A Path to Excellence

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The author wishes to assure the reader that the use of personal pronouns "he" or "she" does not imply the exclusion of any person.

In an effort to avoid confusion, the author has chosen to conform to the Western custom of placing surnames last rather than first, which is routine in Asia. The only exceptions are General Choi Hang Hi and General Kim Yu Shin, since they are universally recognized by this iteration.

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Foreword

Grandmaster Richard Chun

So much about taekwondo has changed since the 1960s when I began teaching in New York City. Back then the term taekwondo was seldom used by schools to describe the style they featured, favoring instead to advertise as karate academies, an imprima-tur more familiar to the public in general. While it is considered the most popular martial art in the world today, taekwondo had not yet found its identity as an Olympic sport and the various institutes or *kwans* had only recently combined under a single standard. Korea, my native land, was still on the mend following the bloody civil conflict of the early 1950s that claimed the lives of so many.

Yet even then I had a clear understanding of where I intended to take the art I had worked so hard to master from an early age. Rather than concentrate purely on the combat sport taekwondo was quickly becoming, I chose instead to promote many of the offensive and defensive skills transmitted to me at the famed Moo Duk Kwan in Seoul by Master Chong Soo Hong. Traditional hand techniques, sweeps, joint locks, and throws were then perceived as being far too dangerous for competition and were subsequently forbidden in the ring. The performance of *poomsae*—the formal exercises representing the essence of the art—was being foreshadowed too by the need to develop modern fighting strategies that would ensure competitive domination in the future. What would become of these hard earned, time tested skills? Would they evaporate and be forgotten like so many other customs throughout the world?

It rapidly became apparent that an organization needed to be created that did not stand in opposition to, but acted in accordance with the various entities that were springing up to support taekwondo as an Olympic sport in America. Undoubtedly, this organization would assist with that worthy goal, but would also continue to propagate the traditional and philosophical aspects of the art. Poomsae, basic technique, ritual one-step sparring, meditation, and self-defense drills would receive equal attention

to that of competitive sparring. And so in 1980 I founded the United States Taekwondo Association whose mission was then and remains now the promotion of the ancient and evolving art of taekwondo.

The USTA has currently been in existence for over twenty-five years, and during that time I have cultivated many fine instructors capable of assisting me in the promotion of taekwondo as the traditional martial art that it was intended to be. Some became world champions. Still others went on to establish schools of their own here and abroad. Yet one in particular, Master Doug Cook, has chosen not only to teach professionally, but to follow in my footsteps and support the art through the written word. While teaching five classes a day sometimes as often as seven days a week, he has authored two books published by YMAA, a highly respected member of the literary community. *Taekwondo—Ancient Wisdom for the Modern Warrior* and *Traditional Taekwondo—Core Techniques, History, and Philosophy* both focus on the philosophy and techniques unique to the practice of traditional taekwondo rather than its sportive mate. Both have become best-sellers and have inspired thousands of students around the world.

In *Taekwondo—A Path to Excellence*, his third book, Doug Cook has again touched on virtues, principles, and techniques that are certain to fortify the martial artist of the twenty-first century. This book then is of value for all who seek excellence in their daily pursuits. Qualities, such as enduring strength, the doctrine of purpose, and respect for tradition, are as applicable to the martial artist as they are to the ordinary individual looking to navigate the adversities modern life proffers.

Still, it is traditional taekwondo based on an action philosophy that this book primarily addresses, and it gives me great comfort and satisfaction to see one of my senior students carry on the traditions I have espoused for so long. In a world of commercial expediency it is easy to fall victim to greed and compromise. Yet Master Cook has consistently taken the high road in providing his students and his readers with high quality instruction and

eminent prose. I commend him for his tireless efforts and highly recommend his books to anyone interested in cultivating an enhanced lifestyle through a diligent practice of the traditional martial arts.

Grandmaster Richard Chun
9th dan black belt
President, United States
Taekwondo Association

Preface

The inspiration for this book first crystallized at thirty-five thousand feet over Arizona one Sunday morning many years ago during a flight to California. A freshly-minted novice at the time, fired with enthusiasm, I would have much preferred to be standing at attention in my taekwondo class that was coincidentally just beginning back in New York rather than sitting shoe-horned into an economy seat that seemed to be shrinking by the minute. In a meager act of contrition, I began to read a celebrated work on the martial arts published over a quarter century ago. With chapters no longer than three or four pages in length and print large enough for an adult with failing eyesight to comfortably read, it still holds water to this day. The ability to pick up this modest tome and within the space of a few short minutes receive a complete dose of knowledge in one sitting was satisfying to say the least.

Since then, over the course of my training, I have read many books devoted to an exploration of the martial arts. Some qualify as true purveyors of wisdom; others less so. Nevertheless, I have endeavored on two separate occasions to contribute to the former, the success of which can only be measured by the reader. Beyond that it has been my privilege to craft frequent articles focusing on traditional taekwondo for several noted magazines. This book, my third, while loosely based on a collection of those writings, has been expanded significantly to include philosophical insights based on a doctrine of purpose as taught to me by my teacher, Grandmaster Richard Chun. This book is about a journey whose ultimate destination is the achievement of physical and spiritual enrichment through the disciplined practice of a traditional martial art. Rather than simply plotting formulas certain to score in the ring, I have attempted to impart essential, defensive elements of the art, both physical and intellectual, that conform to the principle of *Do*, or *The Way* of taekwondo. Without this crucial knowledge, practice becomes a peripheral component of existence rather than an organic ingredient supporting a meaningful life.

Preface

It is my sincere hope that this book will act as an inspiration to martial artists of all styles, levels, and ages. Although its concentration clearly rests on traditional taekwondo as opposed to its sportive mate, the philosophy within can be applied to all disciplines regardless of heritage. If the reader is driven to train with increased vigor, further investigate his art through prose, or simply enjoy his practice due to an enhanced view of its philosophical underpinnings, then I have accomplished my goal.

Master Doug Cook
5th dan black belt

Acknowledgments

There are many individuals who have graciously contributed to the successful completion of this work. Certain places, too, have provided a peaceful setting conducive to creative writing. Subsequently, I would like to express my deep appreciation and thanks to the following:

Catherine DeCesare for the many illustrations throughout this book aptly depicting the true heart of traditional taekwondo . . . here, she is the Um to my Yang.

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My mother and father, Roy and Joan Cook, for showing me *The Way* in the first place.

And most importantly, Patricia Ann, Erin Elizabeth, and Kristin Lee Cook for a never-ending universe of love, understanding and encouragement. To whatever Energy governs us, Bless Them.



Part One

What Is Taekwondo?

Defining an Art

TAEKWONDO—the traditional martial art and Olympic sport of Korea, an Asian discipline with over sixty-million practitioners worldwide.¹ What is it about this unique way of life targeted at cultivating the mind, body, and spirit that has captured the hearts and minds of so many? Could it be that taekwondo contains over 3,200 empty-hand combat techniques with proven effectiveness on the field of battle establishing it as an authentic means of self-defense?² Or is it the metaphysical and philosophical aspects of the art that attract those seeking more than just a simple, physical workout. Perhaps it is the fact that in a constellation of many martial disciplines, taekwondo shares the spotlight, along with judo, as being the only two recognized by the International Olympic Committee IOC and having the exclusive privilege of participating in the Olympic Games. Either way, it is clear that taekwondo has taken its place as the fastest growing, most popular martial art in the world today.

Without a doubt, the current popularity enjoyed by taekwondo, literally translated as “foot-hand-way,” or “the way of striking with hands and feet,” is largely due to the tireless efforts of several international organizations supported by seasoned master instructors who have dedicated their lives to promoting the art around the globe. Where many martial arts have attempted to attain Olympic recognition and failed, taekwondo has successfully managed to do so through an ingenious process of standardization introduced during its formative years by the Korea Taekwondo Association (KTA), the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF), and the Kukkiwon, center of taekwondo operations

worldwide. This development required the core infrastructure of taekwondo to become unified and thus transferable wherever it is taught.

Mirroring its success as a competitive entity, the martial art of taekwondo with roots that date back to antiquity, different from the martial sport bearing the same name, has preserved its technical skills and combat integrity through the efforts of several institutions, including the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF) and the United States Taekwondo Association (USTA), organizations that perpetuated taekwondo as a traditional method of self-defense.



World Taekwondo Federation, International Taekwon-Do Federation, and United States Taekwondo Association emblems.

The WTF, ITF, the Kukkiwon, and the USTA have contributed greatly to the promotion of taekwondo around the world and are virtually responsible for its vast popularity. It is essential that students become acquainted with these organizations in order to appreciate their historical significance and the important role they will play in the future.

On March 22, 1966, taekwondo assumed its rightful place as a global martial art with the founding of the ITF under the direction of General Choi Hong Hi. What began as a group of nine charter nations, including Korea, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, West Germany, America, Egypt, Italy, and Turkey, quickly grew into a worldwide organization boasting over thirty member countries. Viewed as a stronghold of traditional taekwondo technique, the ITF flourished and continues to maintain a strong global presence to this day.

Considered the guardian of sport taekwondo, the WTF was established on June 3, 1973. This organization effectively replaced the ITF following its relocation abroad and is responsible for developing modern, innovative methods of competition while at the same time maintaining traditional technique. As with any complex organization, the WTF is composed of many specialized entities including the financial, women's, collegiate, and referee committees. Its origin followed a meeting of the thirty delegate countries that had participated in the First World Taekwondo Championships held at the Kukkiwon in May of 1973. At this meeting Dr. Un Yong Kim was elected the first president of the new federation. Presently, with its headquarters at the Joyang Building, Seoul, South Korea, the WTF acts as a clearinghouse for tens of thousands of applicants throughout the world seeking legitimate black belt certification through their national governing bodies. Due to the stewardship of its many experienced officials, coupled with its 189 member nations, taekwondo remains the only martial art, other than judo, to maintain official Olympic status.

The USTA, whose mission it is to “promote the ancient and evolving art of taekwondo,” was established in 1980 by



Part Two

An Honorable History

The Birth of a Nation: The Ancient Myth of Tangoon

Long ago, before the first kick was thrown, before the blocks and strikes of taekwondo were canonized, there existed a land, rich in greenery with mountains masked in swirling mists that rushed to meet the sky. It was a time when animals were thought to speak and heaven and earth were one. Legend tells us that it was here in these Eastern lands, during the year 2333 B.C., that the divine being Hwanin commanded his son Hwanung to descend from heaven and inhabit the pinnacle of Mount Baekdoo, a sacred place, with express instructions to carve a new country from the primordial terrain. Hwanung, who personified the virtues of honor, courage, and trust, brought with him the Wind-General, the Rain-Governor, and the Cloud-Teacher, along with three thousand lesser spirits to help support his efforts. Together they established Shinshi, the mythical Divine City.

Not far from Shinshi, in a small cave engraved in the rock, dwelt a lumbering bear and a fierce tiger who in their own way desired to become human. Upon overhearing the prayers of the bear and tiger, Hwanung offered to grant their wish under the condition that they remain secluded in the cave for a period of one hundred days, eating nothing but the twenty garlic cloves and artemisia provided. Because of the tiger's innate restlessness, after twenty days he was unable to meet this demand. The bear, on the other hand, whose patience prevailed, exited the cave as a beautiful maiden and was given the name Ungyo, or "the girl incarnated from a bear." Hwanung was so taken with Ungyo's magnificence that he asked her to become his bride. Miraculously, following



Courtesy of Korea Tourism Organization

Tangoon, the mythical progenitor of Korea, thought to have lived in 2333 B.C.

the transmission of Hwanung’s breath of life, she gave birth to a son, naming him Tangoon or “Lord of the Birch Trees.” Raised by the ancients, Tangoon went on to help civilize the uncultivated clans by teaching them farming, architecture, and various social graces.¹⁹

After uniting the six northern tribes, Tangoon, considered the progenitor of modern-day Korea, established the nation of Ko-Chosun, the “Land of the Morning Calm.” More importantly, the mythical founder, purported to have ruled until 1122 B.C., is

credited with the origination of a traditional, national philosophy through his advocacy of hongik-ingan, the benefits of universal humanism through harmony, and jaese-ihwa, the rationalization of human living.²⁰ These concepts, based on Confucian thought, codify the Korean sense of duty to the state, family, and forebears, and constitute the foundation of a social framework that has blossomed into the uniquely Korean culture that exists today. Furthermore, the ancients needed to reconcile the ruthlessness of the elements, natural phenomenon, and a highly restrictive lifestyle by clinging to a belief in heaven's god, or impeccable virtuousness that later became defined as seon. Subsequently, these doctrines contributed much to the Do, or The Way of taekwondo, as well as shaping the overall character of traditional and contemporary Korean ethics.

The Three Kingdoms Period: Battlegrounds of Honor

Ancient legends aside, the martial tradition of taekwondo can be traced back to a primitive era in Korean history categorized as the Three Kingdoms Period. Koguryo, the largest of the three, is alleged to have been founded in 37 B.C. along the Yalu River and encompassed an area with landholdings reaching far up into what is now North Korea and Manchuria. A society given to a militaristic worldview, ancient Chinese records describe the Koguryoan people as fond of raiding, quick-tempered, extremely violent, yet courageous. As a result of daily military exercises, it is said that their walking stride was as fast as running.

Due to its close proximity to the vastness of China, the kingdom was in constant conflict with its imperialistic neighbor. Early on, Koguryo forces were intent on the expulsion of the Chinese command posts at Nang-nang, setting the stage for countless, future battles. A reflection of the kingdom's aggressive nature can be seen in the actions of Ulchi Mundok, a cunning military commander who, in A.D. 612, waged war against the recently unified Chinese Sui dynasty. Using deception as a tool, he entered



Part Three

Becoming a Steadfast Practitioner

Remaining True to the Art

I am always careful to remind my students that the practice of traditional taekwondo is not easy. I tell them that if it were, everyone would train. And it is not difficult to see why. Movies abound with our favorite stars leaping through the air, chopping, punching, and kicking while making the world right for the meek. Naturally, it is understandable how the average person would identify with these heroes, male and female alike, and wish to emulate them. Yet the true cost of training, both to the practiced and the vanquished, is frequently hidden by the way martial arts are portrayed on television and in the cinema. Not shown are the hours, days, weeks, and years of difficult work the martial artist must put in to develop his technique. Invisible, too, are the deadly consequences of a single well-placed kick or strike. If we were to believe what we see on the screen, we would think that skill sprouts eternal, with little or no effort required to become a true killing machine. Obviously, this is simply not the case. Nor is death and destruction the ultimate goal of the martial artist. In order to become proficient in the traditional martial arts, the practitioner must possess a tireless commitment and undying passion. He must be willing to forego leisure time activities that are often more entertaining. He must also exhibit the capacity to endure sore muscles, aching joints, and an occasional bruise or two. But above all, an abundant supply of patience is essential.

For most of us, the mind has the ability to retain information far more efficiently than our muscles. We must convince our bodies that we are capable of moving in ways that have abandoned many of us since childhood. To observe my adult students,

who not long ago were prematurely rooted to the earth due to age, execute jump turning kicks coupled with focused strikes is confirmation enough that taekwondo is a truly liberating force. Children too are challenged, not based on agility or aerobic quality as are their more mature counterparts, but by coordination, balance, and strength. Still, with patience, encouragement, and indomitable will, they excel. Skills of this nature do not come easily. Determination and an unswerving faith in taekwondo are paramount. This devotion is not misplaced even though, admittedly, taekwondo is not the solution to every offensive threat. Yet with thousands of battle-proven techniques at his disposal the taekwondoist should, through patience and practice, cultivate the proper defensive tools for use against almost any threat.

This leads us to the question of cross-training—the practice of actively mixing styles. As a rule of thumb, it is said that a martial artist devoted to a particular discipline should remain faithful to that art for a minimum of seven to eight years before cross-training. Why is this?

First, the martial artists must learn the fundamentals of their art. Without strong basic skills, everything else will falter. This process is generally accomplished during the students' years as a color belt—and then, at black belt, their training truly begins. The path to success in the martial arts unavoidably takes time and if approached with sincerity will provide the practitioner with the tools necessary to continue the journey with confidence—a journey, thankfully, with no foreseeable end.

When considering cross-training, thought should be given to cultural implications and how they relate to a particular martial art. In the past, geography played an influential role on technical development. On another level, so did a nation's history and worldview. Martial arts for many nations, including Korea, historically represented primary instruments of war and were successfully exported to the present as evidenced in taekwondo being used during the Vietnam War.³¹

Nations with a history of repeated invasions and strife had to develop practical martial arts capable of not only defending

physically, but emotionally as well. These physical and emotional imprints, for good or ill, often prejudice the underlying philosophy of a given martial art. Subsequently, toggling between differing cultural viewpoints can prove confusing for the martial artist that lacks the maturity to appreciate these distinctions.

Additionally, it is recommended that the practitioner remain focused on a single art due to its technical complexity. Simply put, memorization and proper execution of the countless blocks, strikes, kicks, formal patterns, and defensive strategies that compose traditional taekwondo leave little room for the infiltration of potentially conflicting philosophies and skills. This concept is apparent when stances found in taekwondo are compared to those shared in the martial arts of Japanese and Chinese origin.

For my part, traditional taekwondo is sufficiently complex to keep me busy for a lifetime. With every advanced poomsae, il su sik, or ho sin sool I perform, I appreciate all the more the road that lies before me—the effort that remains to take my practice one step closer to the core of the art. These increments are small, not the dramatic leaps and bounds experienced by the novice. Yet, as the years go by, I eagerly pursue my training, training punctuated with *purpose* and *concentrated martial intent*, in the hope of becoming a steadfast practitioner, faithful to the traditional martial art of taekwondo.

The Practice of Purpose in Taekwondo

In the summer of 1999, during a training excursion to Korea, Grandmaster Richard Chun and I were traveling south to Kyongju by bus along with a sizable contingent of our students. This offered me a wonderful opportunity to sit with my teacher and seek answers to questions we seldom had time to explore back home. After covering the obvious quandaries regarding history and culture, I decided to venture into less familiar territory. At the time I was faced with a dilemma that only someone with his vast experience could conceivably help me with. While



Part Four

Just for Beginners

First Steps

The most difficult part of traditional taekwondo is not learning the first kick or punch. It is not struggling to remember the motions of a poomsae or becoming acquainted with Korean culture. Rather, it is taking the first step across the threshold of the dojang door. This is a point where roads diverge, where choices are made that will resonate throughout a lifetime.

Without a doubt, most students reflect on their first days of training with memories of apprehension, wonder, anticipation, and accomplishment: apprehension based on the mostly unfounded fear of potential injury, wonder at the potent secrets hidden within the martial arts, anticipation at the vast landscape of possibilities they represent, and, ultimately, accomplishment in the sense that they have persevered long enough to overcome the myriad challenges endured by the novice. Just like a cork riding up and down on a troubled sea, all martial artists, at one time or another, experience self-doubt mixed with exhilaration and tedium commingled with enthusiasm. However, since taekwondo practice mirrors life, shifts in behavior are to be expected. With this in mind, an ingredient of self-moderation must be cultivated in an effort to balance extremes in temperament. These are lessons sincere taekwondoists will carry with them day and night, year in, year out as they come to realize that traditional taekwondo is a way of life and not a seasonal pursuit as is sport.

As a color belt, students can effectively visualize themselves as hovering above a great globe of knowledge. Upon earning the black belt, they barely skim the surface of this complex world. With each successive year of practice, the student drills down ever

closer to the core of taekwondo. This takes a brand of patience uncommon in modern society. Yet this persistence, this ability to endure, nurtures a unique, mindful character so essential in dealing with the adversities of daily life. Subsequently, just as basic technique, forms, and sparring—the vital elements of traditional taekwondo—represent the *physical* bedrock of the art, psychological defensive strategies, too, can be cultivated in an effort to fortify the mind. These life lessons are of great value to students wanting to gain a profound understanding of the martial arts and what they mean to the individual in the twenty-first century.

Enduring Strength

The world today is a complex and demanding place filled with reward, sacrifice, and adversity. We are born into the lives we lead and deserve nothing more than what we gain through honest work. Some believe that in order to get ahead they must think first and foremost of themselves. While destiny may be fulfilled by the actions we channel toward our quest for personal success, both in our martial arts training and in private pursuits, we must also develop a compassionate heart and remain sensitive to the needs of others. Perhaps most important, we must cultivate *enduring strength*, the strength necessary to protect ourselves and our clarity of mind from extreme adversity. Enduring strength can further be quantified as the psychological muscle required to abide radical pain and suffering whether it be unique to the individual or external in nature relating to someone we know and love. It is the ability to remain focused regardless of intense distraction in order to provide support and stability to those around us at a time when they may need it most. Often it is irrelevant whether the trouble is physically or mentally rooted since the despair it creates results in the same emotional distress. Exhibiting enduring strength may begin by merely acting the part, putting on a game face and attempting not to waver while, in reality, your soul is plagued with fear. This may be a very difficult task

to accomplish particularly if the crisis has come as a shock or surprise.

Fortunately, traditional taekwondo provides a platform upon which enduring strength can be nurtured. However, being a martial artist does not automatically qualify the practitioner as being someone gifted with enduring strength. On the contrary, having shed the bravado many people artificially display in trying times, we as taekwondoists, by virtue of the humility demanded by diligent training, appreciate the great effort required to genuinely develop the simplest component of a strong character. Yet our ability to remain open to change and self-improvement gives us a leg up in our attempt to generate what amounts to internal resiliency. Furthermore, to realize the virtue of enduring strength, martial artists must approach their training with sincerity and purpose, fully appreciating the value of *do*, or *The Way*. Mindful practice of any classical martial way assumes that the practitioner is intent on a path toward holistic enrichment and not just in search of combat skills. Paradoxically, it is through the practice of these combat skills that the martial artist nurtures moral fiber.

Regrettably, turmoil frequently lingers, causing enduring strength to float on a foundation of patience. Sickness, financial strain, and family unrest have no determinate timetable, forcing the individual to undergo seemingly unremitting stress and confusion. However, martial artists devoted to their practice can testify to the fact that patience is the cornerstone of progress. The waiting period between color belt, or *gup* levels, is clearly an exercise in patience while the time span between dan, or black belt degree levels, is decidedly measured in years. This custom of waiting cultivates undeniable patience that can be transferred to any situation in life.³⁶

If the practitioner is following the path of traditional taekwondo, then certainly meditation and its related benefits is a vital ingredient of his training regimen. There are many goals of meditation in the martial arts, but when attempting to build enduring strength, serenity of mind in conjunction with Ki enhancement is a major contributor. Sitting in quiet reflection for a



Part Five

My Students and Colleagues

The Dojang—A Safe Haven

On September 11, 2001, I was employed in New York City at a job that I would soon vacate in favor of teaching martial arts professionally. On that tragic but stunningly brilliant morning, I stood on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Nineteenth Street watching the destruction of the World Trade Center unfold before my very eyes.

Seconds after seeing the second plane slam into the South Tower, realizing full well that this was an assault on our country equal only in magnitude to the infamous attack on Pearl Harbor, I quickly made the decision to leave the city to seek the safety of my home and family sixty miles away.

Convincing a business associate that it would be best to flee the ensuing confusion, we shot up the FDR Drive in his car, listening as an incredulous radio personality announced the attack on the Pentagon, the crash of an airliner in Pennsylvania, and ultimately, the collapse of the Twin Towers. Anyone locally who bore witness to the rapidly unfolding disaster will appreciate the shock we both felt.

Almost three hours later, after plucking my children from the chaos of a terrified classroom and attempting to calm my wife upon our return home, I sat in my study fielding telephone call after telephone call inquiring as to my safety. Most were communications with friends and relatives, yet a significant amount of the calls originated from frightened and disoriented students. Was I safe? Is our taekwondo school open? Would classes be held today as scheduled? Answering in the affirmative to all three questions, I drove to the dojang with one thought in mind: as a martial artist

and school owner who realized there was little any of us could personally do at this point, it was my mission to provide a sense of security and shelter for my anxious students. While people were flocking in droves to homes, social centers, and churches in every corner of the county, our students, who sought tranquility in taekwondo, were resolutely making their way to a place familiar to them, a place that offered a sense of community and collective comfort from the staggering events of the day.

I will never forget the mood in the dojang that evening. Yet I was not surprised given the literal translation of dojang—a place to study *The Way*. The tragedy brought our martial arts family together as a unit. Defined by our doboks, belts, and the rituals of our art, we began to train. Slowly the spirit of taekwondo took hold until—at least for a few hours—we enjoyed a respite from a world on the threshold of our community gone haywire. What was it about this physical space that worked its magic on us? What profound distraction could possibly supplant the mind-numbing sensations that roared through our brains like a hurricane, resonating in our bones?

It is not unusual for taekwondoists to feel a sense of comfort when they step into the dojang, a familiarity that adds consistency to an often hectic life. This is especially true when business or family matters result in a short-term absence. Returning, the practitioner crosses a spiritual boundary onto the training floor in the wake of the required bow of respect, glances in the mirror, and seeing his or her reflection is reminded of the nobility and perseverance associated with a diligent study of the traditional martial arts.

Furthermore, it is here in the dojang that a mutual respect is forged between those with a common goal, replacing the daily tug-of-war found in the workplace, schoolyard, or playing field. There is a giver and receiver of technique that alternates between individuals. In an extraordinary display of self-control, practitioners of all ages and both genders lend their bodies to one another in an effort to achieve personal excellence through the practice of an ancient and evolving art. In the ebb and flow of self-defense,

one strikes, another blocks; one sweeps, another yields. It is this strange dance that promotes courtesy, focus, and reverence for tradition in the martial artist. Only in the safety of the dojang can these skills be fostered since it is understood what happens here remains here.

Moreover, a traditional dojang is built for utility and veneration of the art. Our national flag and that of the Republic of Korea adorn the wall. Sometimes, a scroll composed of rice paper scripted with calligraphy decorates an honored space, its flowing brush strokes representing a principle or ideal unique to the martial arts. Too, it is not a place devoid of color; often the training floor is covered with the bright array of a puzzle mat, radiating a pattern of contrasting hues. Aside from being a feast for the eyes, its functionality serves to protect the practitioner from the throws and sweeps found in traditional taekwondo. If mirrors are present, they are constantly wiped clear of smudges and fingerprints since the cleanliness of the dojang and all that it contains is a direct reflection of the technical precision expected from the students who fill it. Kicking targets, like a column of



The training hall of the Chosun Taekwondo Academy.



Part Six

Economics of the Martial Arts

The Grand Mosaic

Maintaining a uniquely traditional martial arts academy as we have at Chosun requires a balance between the grand mosaic of physical skill that comprises taekwondo and commercial solvency. This equilibrium is repeatedly challenged by the sincere school owner's desire to preserve the often mystical Asian customs surrounding the martial arts and consistently putting food on the table. Consequently, the contemporary manager searches for methods to motivate students while providing them with authentic martial arts instruction in conjunction with a road to spiritual enhancement and physical fitness—never an easy chore. This dichotomy represents the economic decisions that need to be recognized when teaching martial arts today.

Understandably, master instructors I come in contact with share a common concern when enrollment in their school either stagnates or, at worst, declines. In response, program directors responsible for growth frequently turn to instruments such as financially obligatory, multi-year contracts in an effort to secure sustained membership. While this practice is understandable given the Western belief that money is the ultimate motivator, there remain other, less onerous methods available to promote student retention. These solutions, however, rely more on a comprehensive knowledge of the technical principles intrinsic to *traditional* taekwondo than they do on shrewd business practice. An article written some years ago by the late martial artist Jane Hallander entitled “Is Taekwondo a Sport or Self-Defense System?” hints at the inherent dangers associated with ignoring these preferences. The author suggests that locating a dojang still teaching

traditional taekwondo will become increasingly difficult as time goes on. Moreover, finding an instructor sufficiently competent to transmit these unique skills to those worthy of its virtues will become even more difficult.

Clearly, due to its Olympic status, many schools currently focus primarily on the combat sport element of taekwondo, an aspect steadfastly developed through the efforts of the WTF. However, by highlighting the requirements for successful competition in the ring, many of the techniques and philosophical underpinnings associated with self-defense, including hand techniques, Ki development, and meditation, have been subjugated or forfeited altogether. These overlooked yet quintessential components of traditional taekwondo constitute a grand mosaic that must be presented in its entirety if the student is to receive a holistic education in this truly authentic martial discipline.

By now, we should be familiar with the pieces of the puzzle that formulate the richly diverse and efficient curriculum unique to traditional taekwondo. Certainly, development of the mind, body, and spirit must be addressed in accordance with the ability to defend against an unprovoked attack. Other vital elements identified earlier include training in one-, two-, and three-step sparring as well as ho sin sool practice. But perhaps the most significant inlay that completes the grand mosaic is the recognition of poomsae and how the formal exercises relate to the various styles of taekwondo. Whether they are the Palgwe or Taegeuk series fashioned by the WTF, or the twenty-four tul in the Chang-Han set created by ITF founder General Choi Hong Hi, formal exercises represent the essence of any classical martial art. In his 1975 book, *Moving Zen*, Shotokan practitioner C.W. Nicol described formal pattern practice as “a dynamic dance, a battle without bloodshed or vanquished.” He further goes on to say that by performing poomsae, “we are somehow touching the warrior ancestry of all humanity” and that “of all the training in karate, none is more vigorous, demanding or exhilarating than the sincere performance of kata.”⁴⁶ From this we can see that poomsae training, if approached in a traditional manner,

cultivates self-defense skills, agility, focus, breath control, and, in most cases, strength coupled with Ki development.

Certainly, there is nothing wrong or sinister with combining healthy profits with a complete curriculum based on *traditional* taekwondo training. This formula is almost certain to keep schools financially solvent and accessible to those investing the patience to seek them out. Furthermore, an educational experience of this nature permits the student to advance in a progressive, orderly fashion challenging the mind, body, and spirit. Moreover, it is important not to give this art away, especially if it has been enhanced by constant practice on the part of the instructor. Yet, in order to successfully transmit traditional taekwondo skills in the manner described above, the practitioner must make the distinction between *teaching* martial arts and *practicing* martial arts.

Pursuing a Career in the Martial Arts

Many years ago, a good friend of mine related a story that I will never forget. An avid golfer, playing as many as four rounds a week, he decided to quit his job in the music business and open a pro shop selling golf-related equipment. He found the enterprise highly enjoyable and stimulating—at least for the first few months. Following this “honeymoon,” it quickly became apparent that *selling* golf supplies was radically different from *playing* golf. In fact, given the reality that he was top man in a one-man venture, he rarely found the time to get out on the green at all. Eventually, the glamour of owning his own business, working days, nights, and on weekends, wore off and he found himself in a position that transformed his passion into an unpleasant chore.

Unhappily, this scenario happens all too often to the practicing martial artist as well. Young people, highly proficient in kicking, punching, and sparring, see an opportunity to parry their hard earned skills into a commercially viable profession. They

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